



Breaking Bad as Southwestern Gothic

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AMERICAN GOTHIC



- Genre markers as sign posts / Generic amalgamation in *Breaking Bad*
- Angela Carter, “We live in gothic times” (132)– marginal literary centers, once on the fringes of the literary canon, have now become more central
- The Gothic as a master trope, expressive of the darkness that underlies all of society
- Gothic: “return to the past, of the repressed and the denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not dare tell itself” (Smith, 1)



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- Duality – Fear the Other, the Other in us
- Attraction/Repulsion
- Exploring social taboos and repressed urges
- Emphasizing the uncanny and grotesque in humanity
- Unacknowledged ghosts of America (exceptionalist presumptions of innocence + genocidal social foundations)
- American frontier Gothic "expresses how alienation and fear both subvert and continually redefine the American ideal of the future as a frontier leading each of us and our nation to ever more positive cultural and psychological transformations" (Graulich, 319)



AMERICAN GOTHIC



- American scene as “unsuitable” for the Gothic, opposed to “common sense” and rationality (J. Fenimore Cooper)
- American Gothic as a “narrative intervention that shadows the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values” (Kollin, 677)
- Teresa Goddu: Gothic literature “unsettles the idea of America, particularly understandings of national innocence and exceptionalism that present the US as a unique experiment in the history of nations” (4)



AMERICAN GOTHIC



- ▶ Leslie Fiedler: American vs. European Gothic “In the American gothic . . . The heathen, unredeemed wilderness and not the decaying monuments of a dying class, nature and not society becomes the symbol of evil” (160)
- ▶ Rationality/Civilization (vs. Wildness and Madness)
- ▶ Guilt
- ▶ The uncanny
- ▶ Abjection / the domestic as abject
- ▶ Fears of contamination / miscegenation / hostile relations among different ethnicities
- ▶ Daunting Wilderness (vs. European castles and civilization) –unexplored, engulfing vastness



FRONTIER / WESTERN / SOUTHWESTERN GOTHIC

- Cinematic Western does not seem “gothic” to us – bright landscapes (as opposed to dark castles and foggy moors of European gothic)
- The frontier as a (movable) site of positive rational progress (vs. regressive, repressed, and irrational characteristics of the Gothic)
- Anti-Westerns: questioning of myths of the West and traditional westerns. Classic westerns borrow from 19th c. Realism and Romanticism, Anti-Westerns borrow from the gothic and grotesque
- The Gothic in the US as “regionally inflected” (see Southern Gothic, for example)
- Southwest – multinational terrain, shaped by different histories (Indian, Mexican, Anglo) – “unfixed” in the geographical imagination, an unstable space neither entirely southern not completely western. “Shifting geography”, the place where the South meets West
- Western frontier as “an intrinsically Gothic symbol”, a sign of the nation’s ambiguous relationship to the land (Kollin, 679)



FRONTIER / WESTER / SOUTHWESTERN GOTHIC

- ▶ Scott P. Sanders “immense and various formations” of the deserts offer “the tangible substance of Southwestern Gothic and the fundamental spirit of this place whose prehistory is inscribed in the landscape”
- ▶ The West as “imaginative frontier between the known and the unknown”, serving as “a bridge to gothic domains” (Mogen, Sanders, and Karpinski 13)
- ▶ Desert towns
- ▶ Unexplained lights
- ▶ Cattle rancher blood feuds
- ▶ Indian mythology
- ▶ Crumbling disrepair of Spanish architecture
- ▶ Long stretches of road / mirages



ATMOSPHERIC/ THE MYTHOLOGICAL FRONTIER IN *BREAKING BAD*

- D. H. Lawrence's "spirit of the place" connected to the landscape – America is not a new land for the Anglos, but "old, old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin" (*Studies in Classic American Literature*)
- American landscape as "full of grinning, unappeased aboriginal demons, too, ghosts, and it persecutes the white men, like some Eumenides" (*Studies in Classic American Literature*)
- Mythical frontier: masculine values of rugged individualism, self-reliance, and freedom.
- Desert as visual embodiment of empty moral landscapes.



ATMOSPHERIC/ THE MYTHOLOGICAL FRONTIER IN *BREAKING BAD*

- Breaking Bad as contemporary Western (standoffs, etc.), “the cavalry is coming” (Jack to Hank), Walt’s arrest, train robbery, final shootout (OK Corral, *Django* 1966)

[Two images removed from the slide: Walt and Hank looking at each other, Walt and Mike walking away from each other as in a duel]



GOTHIC LANDSCAPE(S) IN *BREAKING BAD*

- Kant (1790): beautiful as “having definite boundaries” vs. sublime as “a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented” (71-72)
- “Landscape of the West is as much a projection of our most deep-seated fears as it is a reflection of our ideals” (Folsom 39, 40)

[Image removed from the slide: Railroad tracks seen from above (Season Five, episode 5, “Dead Fright”)]



GOTHIC LANDSCAPE(S) IN *BREAKING BAD*

- “Geological Gothicism” of the Southwest: rock formations, canyons, pits...
Mud and stone architecture of Pueblo ruins, cliffs...

[Image removed from the slide: Walt confronts Gus in the desert (Season 3, episode 13, “Full Measure”)]



GOTHIC LANDSCAPE(S) IN *BREAKING BAD*

- First scene of the series – beauty of the desert + grotesque (dirt road, pants falling from the sky, man in his underwear)
- Different scenarios in the series: border cities, desert, suburban neighborhoods, strip malls, badly lit underground meth labs.

[Two images removed from the slide: Tuco's shack in the desert (Season 2, episode 2, "Grilled"), and Walt in his underwear on a desert road (Season 1, episode 1, "Pilot")]



GROTESQUE VIOLENCE AND MADNESS IN *BB*

- Bathtub scene
- Gustavo's death

[Two images removed from the slide: Walt and Jesse look at the hole in the ceiling caused by acid in a tub (Season 1, episode 2, "Cat's in the Bag"), Gus's face (Season 4, episode 13, "Face Off")]



GROTESQUE VIOLENCE AND MADNESS IN *BB*

- Tortuga's head on a tortoise, lumbering through the desert and then exploding
- ATM scene
- Obsession – hunt for a single fly
= one entire episode

[Two images removed from the slide: Walt looks at the fly that has landed on his glasses (Season 3, episode 10, "Fly"); a turtle crawls in the desert with Tortuga's head on its shell (Season 2, episode 7, "Negro y Azul")]



JEKYLL AND HYDE/DOPPELGANGERS/DESCENT INTO EVIL IN *BREAKING BAD*

- Vs. the Western as the redemption of a hero / antihero.
- Liking evil characters as a mark of “sophisticated watching” (Klosterman, *I Wear the Black Hat*).
- Evil guys as the one who “know the most, but cares the least” (Klosterman)
- Often, Gothic stories as a metaphor for an individual's struggle for a complete identity (e.g. Poe's “Fall of the House of Usher”, “William Wilson”...)

[Image removed from the slide: composite drawing showing Walt at the beginning of the series and as Heisenberg]



JEKYLL AND HYDE/DOPPELGANGERS/DESCENT INTO EVIL IN *BREAKING BAD*

- Walt as decent, well meant, family man who plays by the rules vs. Heisenberg, high school chemistry teacher to deadly egomaniacal villain
- As viewers, we have to *interpret* Walt's mind and development/descent through gestures and vague comments.

[Image removed from the slide: Walt looks at a distorted reflection of his face on towel dispenser after he has punched it repeatedly (Season 2, episode 9, "4 days out")]

JEKYLL AND HYDE / DOPPELGÄNGERS / DESCENT INTO EVIL IN *BREAKING BAD*

- At first, Walter *pretends* to be more dangerous and ruthless than he really is, but as the series progresses, he *becomes* the most dangerous and ruthless of them all – and there is no turning back
- Journey to evil /journey to truth – essential wickedness, selfishness, and malice. No redemption, no heroism
- “I did it for me, I liked it, I was good at it, and I was really, I was really alive”
- Walter vs. Jesse – Jesse as irresponsible and immature at the beginning – erring, regret, guilt, “a better man”

[Image removed from the slide: Walter watches Jesse's girlfriend asphyxiate in her own vomit (Season 2, episode 12, “Phoenix”)]



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